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The President's Radio Address

January 24, 2004

Good morning. In my State of the Union Address, I spoke of a great priority for our Nation, to confront the rising cost of health care and make sure that more of our citizens can afford the health care they need. Health care costs are rising too fast for many families and businesses. It is time to address this problem directly, with five clear steps that Congress can take this year.

First, we can help control rising health care costs by cutting down on frivolous lawsuits against doctors and hospitals. When health care providers are responsible for injuries, they should be accountable. Yet no one was ever healed by a junk or frivolous lawsuit.

This week, I will travel to Little Rock, Arkansas, to visit Baptist Health Medical Center. For Baptist and other hospitals across the Nation, frivolous lawsuits have dramatically increased the cost of medical liability premiums. These costs are passed on to patients in higher bills. These costs are driving doctors from important work, such as delivering babies. And these costs are driving some doctors out of medicine entirely.

In order to protect the doctor-patient relationship, Congress should pass medical liability reform that removes the threat of frivolous lawsuits and the needless costs they impose on our health care system.

Second, we should help more small businesses afford health insurance for their workers by allowing these firms to band together and negotiate for lower insurance rates. These association health plans give small employers the same bargaining power as big companies, making it easier for them to provide employee health coverage. The House has passed a bill supporting these health plans, and the Senate needs to act.

Third, Congress should give lower income Americans refundable tax credits to help them purchase health insurance. These tax credits would total up to \$1,000 for individuals and \$3,000 for families. For many Amer-

icans lacking health insurance, these credits would make the difference between affording insurance and going without.

Fourth, we should help Americans with their health care costs by encouraging the use of health savings accounts. Congress passed these accounts last year in the Medicare bill, allowing people to save money for future medical expenses tax-free. People who make use of health savings accounts also will buy high-deductible insurance policies to protect them against catastrophic medical costs like hospitalization or major surgery. This year, I am urging Congress to make those premiums 100-percent tax deductible. This new deduction would strengthen health savings accounts and make health insurance more affordable for millions of Americans not covered through their workplace.

And fifth, we can control health care costs and improve care by moving American medicine into the information age. My budget for the coming year proposes doubling to \$100 million the money we spend on projects that use promising health information technology. This would encourage the replacement of handwritten charts and scattered medical files with a unified system of computerized records. By taking this action, we would improve care and help prevent dangerous medical errors, saving both lives and money.

In all these measures, we are upholding the basic principle that private health care and the sanctity of the doctor-patient relationship make America's health care the best in the world. And with the help of Congress, this year we will strengthen our private system of care by addressing the rising cost of health care and helping more Americans afford health coverage.

Thank you for listening.

NOTE: The address was recorded at 9:20 a.m. on January 23 in the Cabinet Room at the White House for broadcast at 10:06 a.m. on January 24. The transcript was made available by the Office of the Press Secretary on January 23 but was embargoed for release until the broadcast. The Office of the Press Secretary also released a Spanish language transcript of this address.

Remarks in Little Rock, Arkansas*January 26, 2004*

The President. Thank you. Thanks for coming. Thanks for having me. Thanks for the warm welcome. I appreciate the fact that a Texan is being treated so well here in Arkansas. *[Laughter]* It's nice to be in this part of the world again. Arkansas is full of really good people, decent, caring people, and so is this hospital. I'm honored that you would have allowed me and my rather significant entourage—*[laughter]*—to come to Baptist Health Medical Center.

I'm here to talk about health issues. I'm here to talk about one of the reasons why health care costs are going up. And that's the fact that we've got too many darn lawsuits, too many frivolous and junk lawsuits that are affecting people. I'm here to make sure that we talk in a way that says to the people of Arkansas and America that we need medical liability reform to make sure that medicine is affordable and available.

But I'm here, first and foremost, to thank the people of this medical center, those here in person and those listening via cable. I want to thank you for what you do. I want to thank you for your heart. I want to thank you for caring about your fellow citizens. I appreciate very much your being on the frontline of healing, healing lives in such a compassionate way. Our health care system is the best in the world, and we need to keep it that way.

I appreciate Russ. Thank you for your introduction. Thanks for being the CEO of Baptist Health System. Thank you for joining us in—we just had what they call a roundtable. The table was square. *[Laughter]* But nevertheless, we had a great discussion, and Russ was there. He talked about this hospital, its outreach, its not only desire to serve people in the city of Little Rock but also its desire to serve people in rural Arkansas.

I want to thank Doug Weeks, the senior vice president and administrator, our host. I want to thank my friend the Governor for coming. Governor Huckabee is a—*[applause]*. Part of good health care depends on how you treat your own body. *[Laughter]* No, I'm serious. I'm absolutely serious. The best way to—one of the best ways to prevent disease is to make right choices. One of the right

choices is to watch what you eat. The Governor has clearly done that. *[Laughter]* He's setting a good example.

Another right choice is to exercise frequently. Some of us like to run—or used to like to run before we broke down. *[Laughter]* I try to exercise 6 days a week. The Governor exercises. And I hope people in Arkansas and around the country understand that the exercise is a good way to avoid disease in the first place. Making right choices is important. And Governor, I appreciate the example you've set for this great State.

I want to thank the Lieutenant Governor, Win Rockefeller, for joining us. Win, glad to see you. He exercises too. *[Laughter]* I appreciate the mayor, Mayor Dailey from Little Rock, for being here. Mr. Mayor, thank you for coming. Mayor Hays of North Little Rock is here as well. Thank you for coming, appreciate you. You've got a tough job. I like to remind the mayors, just go ahead and fill the potholes, and everything will be fine. *[Laughter]*

I know we've got leaders from the statehouse here, Senator Baker and Representative Parks and others. Thank you all for coming out and giving me a chance to share some thoughts with you.

Before I get into the issue of health, I do want to remind you that our country still faces big challenges. And we're rising to meet the challenges. The most important job of my administration is to protect the American people, is to chase down those who would do us harm and bring them to justice, is to never forget the lessons of September the 11th, is to stay on the offensive, and that's what we're doing.

We're spreading freedom, and as we do so, the world becomes more peaceful. Freedom is not America's gift to the world. Freedom is the Almighty's gift to each man and woman in the world.

I appreciate so very much the contribution of the Arkansas Guard. Over 4,000 troops are part of our effort to not only make America more secure but to make the world more free. I know that the Governor informed me that these troops are ready to go. They understand the mission. They're proud to serve our country. I'm proud to call them—I'm proud to be their Commander in Chief. And